Przemysław Michalski

# *The Motif of Man Fleeing God in Two Victorian Poems:* The Wreck of the Deutschland *and* The Hound of Heaven

In this paper I set out to compare two widely acclaimed Victorian poems: "The Hound of Heaven" and "The Wreck of the Deutschland." Both fall into the vast category of religious verse, with some lines having a clearly mystical ring. What I am interested in this paper is to examine how the poets try to (or used to try) escape from God before finally recognizing the futility of their efforts. I would like to start by examining the famous "Hound of Heaven." Francis Thompson, a minor Victorian poet, is usually dismissed as a religious versifier, who had his rare flashes of true brilliance, but whose poems are, for their most part, unreadable on account of their smothering loquacity and infantile emotionalism. Their once feeble appeal has vanished and to modern readers his poems are yet another remnant of the rampant sentimentality of the day. At the same time, however, one has to remember that apart from some dainty little poems (e.g. the lovely "Arab Love-Song") there is one genuinely impressive ode, which can still stand firmly on its own, finding its way into anthology after anthology of Victorian verse.

The famous "Hound of Heaven" is by far the best poem Francis Thompson ever wrote despite its occasional lapses into bland emotionalism and needless verbosity. It is also one of a small group

of Victorian religious poems whose power has not waned "down the arches of the years."

The poem opens with a haunting picture of man fleeing God and I would like to examine this stanza in greater detail since, being an inventory of possible hiding places in man's flight from God, it introduces the main problem of the poem: man's escape from God and God's subsequent pursuit of man:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind[1]

The situation introduced is that of a person who looks back to the days of his Godless existence and gives a narrative of his attempts at evading God. I think it might be interesting to analyze that situation using some categories of Kierkegaardian philosophy.

According to the Danish philosopher the man living in Christianity lives in a pneumatically determined universe (i.e. Universe determined by the spirit) and, as a result, it is incumbent on him to make a radical either-or choice between the Infinite (God) and the finite (which Kierkegaard calls "immediacy"). This is given poetic illustration in lines 20–21 and 130–131:

I was sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have nothing else.[2]

Ah! Is Thy love

[1] All the quotations from *The Hound of Heaven* come from *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, eds. Nicholson and Lee (1917).

[2] *The Hound of Heaven*, ll. 20–21.

A weed, albeit an amaranthine weed,
Suffering no flowers except its own to mount?[3]

In this sense, man either places himself safely in the hands of God, or, consciously or not, repulses him and is forced to flee as God persists in quest of human love (again, this flight may be conscious, or unconscious). Such flight from God is what Kierkegaard calls despair.

How then does the speaker in the poem try to escape from the terrible, devouring eyes of God? First of all, he tries to find refuge in time. The line "down the nights and down the days" points to the incessant necessity for sustained effort of escaping God – man has to be constantly vigilant lest God should find a chink, a fissure through which He could squeeze into the human heart. "I fled Him down the arches of the years" indicates the sheer duration of God's indefatigable pursuit and man's pertinacious refusal to yield. But it also points to something else: to the very possibility of finding refuge in time, in which case the immediacy and temporality serve as the hiding places of the soul, or to put it differently, immediacy is considered to be the only possible milieu of existence. When the immediacy opens itself up towards the infinite and the eternal, it is as if cleansed with fire; as a result, time ceases to be a relentless flux leading from the infinity of the past into the infinity of the future, the kind described by T.S. Eliot: "Ridiculous the sad waste time stretching before and after."[4] The intersection between the temporal and eternal becomes possible. God chases man in order to make him aware of this possibility. Later on in the poem we have a glimpse at the eternal through Maya's veil of temporality:

I dimly guess what time in mists confounds
Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds

[3] *The Hound of Heaven*, ll. 130–131.

[4] T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton* (London: Faber, 1963).

From the hid battlements of Eternity
Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then
Round the half-glimpsed turrets slowly wash again.[5]

After such a radical transformation of one's mode of experiencing time (which Heidegger called *die Zeitigung der Zeit*), it no longer has the appallingly homogenous character like the sand in the deserts described by De Quincey. The transformation of the way man experiences time has twofold consequences: firstly, time is no longer threatened to be truncated by the impending apocalypse (whether personal or global) but is felt to find its fulfilment in the eternal. Not in such a way, however, in which eternity looms up hazily in the distant future, in what established religions usually refer to as "life beyond the grave." No, instead of remaining a radically transcendent dimension of life, the eternal actually enters the finite world as soon as the soul allows God to catch it. As a consequence, life even on this side of the grave is permeated with the tangible presence of eternity. The eternal is no longer agonizingly transcendent but becomes an ever-present actuality. After the soul has let itself be caught and cleansed by the terrifying touch of God (the kind of surrender which is so exquisitely depicted by Hopkins in "The Wreck of the Deutschland": "I did say yes / O at lightning and lashed rod"[6]) every moment of life is underpinned with the inexplicable mystery of eternity. Conversely, the man who has succeeded in evading God lives in the unbearable absoluteness of unredeemable time experienced as Heraclitean flux. The inexorability of passing time is felt as the final and unchangeable axiom of such an existence; there is no comfort of resurrection. Such a person lives in what Eliot calls "eternally present time" ("If all

[5] *The Hound of Heaven*, ll. 143–147.

[6] All the quotations from Hopkins' poetry come from *Poems of Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner and N. MacKenzie (Oxford: 1984). *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ll. 9–10.

time is eternally present all time is unredeemable"[7]). Having failed to establish himself in the absolute, man is destined to drift from one insignificant event to another. All his enterprises miscarry as they fail to give him what he really needs, and what the German philosopher Peter Wust calls *securitas divina*. The illustration of this plight is to be found in two lines of "The Hound of Heaven."

> All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.[8]
>
> Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me[9]

Mystics teach us that the touch of God batters the human heart with its love, the touch of His infinity, on the other hand, batters the human notion of time as consisting of an infinite number of identical points emerging from the nothingness of the future and momentarily fading into the nothingness of the past.

Let us now examine the line from the angle of conscious and unconscious despair. In order to do that we need a very brief summary of Kierkegaard's position on this issue. He believes that in his quotidian existence man lives submerged in so-called "immediacy." He flees God down the nights and down the days by plunging headlong into an unreflective existence of daily chores which take up his whole time. He claims to have no time for reflection because of the busy kind of life he is forced to live, but, in reality, precisely the opposite is true. He lives a busy life so as not to have any free time for reflection. He instinctively feels that even a smallest reflection on his unreflection would finally prove "the thin end of the wedge" exposing him precariously to the absolute (i.e. God, infinity, eternity – the words are interchangeable in the context). Even the thinnest beam of light would force him to crawl

[7] *Burnt Norton*, ll. 4–5.

[8] *The Hound of Heaven*, l. 15.

[9] *The Hound of Heaven*, l. 51.

out of his hideaway and face the light, and we know from Plato that to crawl out of the cave and face the dazzling light of truth means going blind (in other words, to have one's firm points of reference dashed to the ground) and this is precisely what he wants to avoid, and so he continues his flight down the nights and down the days of outwardly busy, but internally barren life. Such a person is a bundle of desires, hopes and fears determined by his social milieu, his duties as a family man, prevalent opinions of the day, his sensual impressions and so on; his dialectic is pleasant/unpleasant; in other words, he is determined in an absolute degree by his immediacy. In the poem such existence is depicted in the following manner:

> Up vistaed hopes I sped;
> And shot, precipitated
> Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears[10]

Let us now proceed to the next lines which speak of fleeing "down the labyrinthine ways of my mind." A totally different kind of a hiding place is described in this line. Now the speaker takes refuge in the labyrinth of his mind, which is a metaphor pregnant with meaning. In what sense can the labyrinth of one's mind serve as a possible haven for the soul on the run?

The crux of the matter probably lies in the fact that the response called forth by Christ's summons to follow Him is not essentially intellectual but existential. The basic dogma of Christianity saying that God is love is neither abstruse nor complicated. Historically, Christianity was a religion propagated by very simple and unlearned people. It is true that within Christianity there is room for both complicated abstractions of theology and rather simple-minded worship. To claim, however, that the former is a necessary element of Christian faith is to distort the

[10] *The Hound of Heaven*, ll. 6–8.

basic Christian truth, which is very simple and clear. Like the speaker in the poem, man is often tempted to complicate straightforward and unambiguous situations in order to evade the necessity of making an unequivocal commitment. The flight down the labyrinthine ways of one's mind is the spiritual plight of one who refuses to become a Christian not through his intellectual deficiency, but because of the absolute demands Christianity makes on man. It is important to make a clear distinction between religion and philosophy. When man says "yes" to God, he lets Him catch his soul in an act of affirmation involving the whole person, not only his reason. It should be clear then that in Christianity, in contrast to what gnostics held, reason cannot have any soteriological value. One should always bear in mind that Christianity was born in the agony on the cross, not during a heated debate of Greek philosophers. Not only cannot reason play an important role in salvation, but it can prove a positive, and for some, insurmountable obstacle on their way to God, or rather, in God's search for them. Such a situation arises when claims of reason are made absolute and its pronouncements are seen as final and irrevocable. In consequence, everything that is perceived as contrary to reason, as flouting its absolute demands, is denied the right to exist. In Christianity this conflict between faith and reason may have a very radical character as Christianity is based on the "outrageous novelty of Incarnation" (Kierkegaard), which, from a worldly point of view, must seem an absurdity. Christianity cannot be deduced from philosophy and to deny the presence of the absurd in religion is to distort its very essence. It was no accident that St. Paul's greatest missionary debacle took place during his stay in Athens. His simple rhetoric, based on, what Kierkegaard calls, "the virtue of the absurd," could find no grip on the minds of Greek intellectuals. I earlier spoke about man's finding refuge in time and immediacy; it seems, however, that the labyrinthine ways of one's mind are

an even better haven for the soul fleeing God than "the arches of the years."

Let us now proceed to "The Wreck of the Deutschland" The circumstances of its composition are well known. When joining the Society of Jesus, Hopkins pledged to abstain from writing poetry as not belonging directly to his duties, and what juvenile verse he had written, was committed to flames. After seven years of silence, at 31, he was encouraged by his superiors to write an occasional piece commemorating five Franciscan nuns forced into exile, whose ship went under in a violent storm. When he set pen to paper he found himself working with a great zeal and enthusiasm and, in a relatively short time, composed a long poem of 280 lines.

Like the previous poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is narrated from a similar, post-conversion point of view. In contrast to Thompson, however, Hopkins concentrates not so much on how he tried to escape God, (the motif is more clearly present in his terrible sonnets, where he almost expostulates with God about His too rapid arrival)[11] but rather on how bending to God's will and entering what Kierkegaard calls "the religious stage of life" resembles a physical struggle with God. What is essentially internal and spiritual has a very tangible equivalent on the sensuous plane. The poem deals roughly with two frequently intermingling motifs: God's action in the human heart and foundering of the ship trapped in a violent storm. One cannot fail to notice a significant similarity between what billowing waters of the Thames do to the ship and what God's supreme touch does to the soul of the believer. Both abound in imagery of destruction, violence, uncontrollable fury, etc., in short, both describe sovereign powers wreaking havoc and ultimately crushing their defenceless victims. The cleansing which the soul has to undergo

[11]For instance in *Carrion Comfort* ("me frantic to avoid / thee and flee?" ll. 8–9)

resembles the elemental fury of the storm, which destroys the ship:

> Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
> And after it almost unmade me, what with dread,
> Thy doing.[12]

(Which is redolent of Donne's agonised apostrophy: "Thou hast made me and shall thy work decay?")

> She drove in the dark to leeward, . . .
> And she beat the bank down with her bows and the ride of her keel;
> The breakers rolled on her beam with ruinous shock[13]

Or there is a curious combining of two conflicting qualities, one could say, a poetical embodiment of the philosophical notion of *coincidentia oppositorum*:

> Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
> Father and fondler of the heart Thou hast wrung.[14]

The alliteration certainly lends certain musical harmony to the line, on the conceptual level, however, the qualities described remain radically different, in fact, they are contradictory, and yet Hopkins seems to imply that somehow they coexist in God's incomprehensible entirety.

A close look at the poem reveals that except for the passages which describe the pure rupture of the communion with the divine, it is full of images and metaphors depicting fighting with God, or wrestling with his angel and the resulting physical injury. God's grace swoops down on the soul like Hopkins's windhover:

[12] *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ll. 5–7.
[13] *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ll. 105, 109–110.
[14] *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ll. 70–71.

swiftly and ruthlessly, it has none of the tenderness of patient beckoning, but the exquisite terror of Pentecostal fire, burning and lacerating the soul in a most terrifying manner. Paul Mariani's commentary is illuminating: "There is no comfort or relief now; the Spirit does not come as a gentle dove, but as the terrible blasting Pentecostal wind which cleanses away the dross of the soul."[15] In fact, the poet often chides God for his tardiness or too great leniency, and asks Him to be more merciless in showing man the ways of God:

> Wring thy rebel, dogged in den,
> Man's malice, with wrecking and storm.
> With an anvil-ding
> And with fire in him forge thy will[16]

Such apostrophes to God's strictness are also suggestive of another similar image, namely that likening the soul to recalcitrant material which has to be forced into shape, or a fallow field in need of a rather ruthless farmer. They emphasise the necessity of divine intervention which alone is capable of salvaging man from the inertia of spiritual death.

The most startling and meaningful example of combining disparate qualities, which find their reconciliation in the mystery of God's *numinosum* (Rudolph Otto's term) is to be found in stanza 11.

> Some find me a sword; some
> the flange and and the rail; flame,
> Fang, or flood[17]

---

[15] P.L. Mariani, *A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Cornell UP, 1970) 225.

[16] *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ll. 67–68, 73–74.

[17] *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ll. 81–83.

The lines are clearly reminiscent of Christ's famous words: "I came not to send peace but a sword" (Matt. 10.34) and in keeping with the imagery used by Hopkins throughout his poetry, in particular in so-called "terrible sonnets" where he compares Christ to a whole variety of ferocious things. Paul Mariani makes the following comment: "But Almighty God is seen as other figures: besides the lion and the wind, he is the wrestler, the hero, the giant, he is a python, strength-giving water, the rod, and the hand of a master which Hopkins, like a thankful servant, kisses."[18]

Are these harsh words saturated with numinous splendour spoken by Christ? The next line makes it clear that they are not as the speaker turns out to be Death not Christ: "goes Death on drum, / And storms bugle his fame." I believe the point of this stanza is to imply that there is something disconcertingly deathlike in the touch of God.

Christ the tiger (the metaphor employed by both Blake and T.S. Eliot) will devour the soul mercilessly in order to transform it into his own likeness. This change is so complete that the soul feels it is dying. Once again it is useful to turn to T.S. Eliot, and his dramatic monologue "The Journey of the Magii." The persona speaking in this dramatic monologue – one of the three wise men who went to offer their gifts to God – looks back on the day when they first saw little Jesus, and remembers the deathlike quality of the experience. It is not only the slow demise of the pagan world heralded by the birth of Christ, but also the death of the speaker in the poem, his own particular death. Even though God chose the humblest possible abode, the spiritual splendour visible to the soul was unbearable and had something deathlike in it.

I would like to round off my paper by quoting a few lines from both poems and then Simone Weil's commentary, whose amazing perspicacity and the gift for marrying up great insight with great

[18]Mariani 231.

concision is extremely useful in bringing one's somewhat rambling thoughts to a close and lending them certain coherence.

> Naked I wait Thy love's uplifted stroke!
> My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me,
> And smitten me to my knee;
> I am defenceless utterly.[19]

> Be adored among men,
> God, three-numberèd form;
> Wring thy rebel, dogged in den,
> Man's malice, with wrecking and storm.
> Beyond saying sweet, past telling of tongue,
> Thou art lightning and love, I found it, a winter and warm;
> Father and fondler of heart thou hast wrung:
> Hast thy dark descending and most art merciful then.[20]

Simone Weil says the following: "Love is a thing of God. It enters man's heart by crushing it. If it is crushed by something else, it is the saddest dissipation."[21]

---

[19] *The Hound of Heaven*, ll. 111–115.

[20] *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, ll. 65–72.

[21] S. Weil, *La Connaissance Surnaturelle*, ed. A. Camus (Editions Gallimard, 1950) 42. My translation.